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Citation	Rehding, Alexander. 2007. Moses' Beginning. Idea and Image in Schoenberg's "Moses und Aron." Special issue, Opera Quarterly 23(4): 395-417.
Published Version	doi:10.1093/oq/kbn036
Accessed	February 19, 2015 8:17:34 AM EST
Citable Link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4738260
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(Article begins on next page)

Moses' Beginning

ALEXANDER REHDING

All beginnings are complicated, and few more so than the story of Moses. No one felt this more acutely than Sigmund Freud, who wrote and reluctantly published his three late essays on *Moses and Monotheism* between 1936 and 1938, just before and after he had to flee his native Austria and go into English exile. In his essays he proposed the provocative, though not quite unprecedented theory that Moses, the leader of the Jews in Egypt, was in fact himself not Jewish but Egyptian. Freud argued that not only was Moses' name more likely to be derived from an Egyptian word than from a Hebrew root, but he also pointed to improbabilities in the legend of Moses' childhood as an adoptee of the Egyptian royal family. Freud knew that his hypothesis was likely to be explosive; the first essay, "Moses an Egyptian," therefore begins with an apologetic *captatio benevolentiae*: "To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly—especially by one belonging to that people."¹

Freud knew full well that the beginnings are critical for the processes they set in motion. In fact, at least since Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the question of beginnings had been firmly associated with specific qualities that had to be present at least *in potentia* in order to actualize. It is not for nothing the Greek ἀρχή translates as both "beginning" and "leadership," (or, in a more poetic translation, as both "commencement" and "commandment"²). In making Moses an Egyptian, Freud introduced an awkward twist into the story of the Jews, where their originator remained outside of the narrative whose unfolding was triggered by him.

Freud evidently felt moved to divert from the classic understanding of beginnings, and replaced it with what amounted to an apparently vague, but actually radical re-definition of

beginnings: “Everything new must have its roots in what came before.”³ With this move, Freud acknowledged the impossibility of pure origins that spin forth out of themselves, but instead are related ever further backwards, in a manner not dissimilar from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, to events that lie outside of the main narrative frame. It is particularly noticeable that Freud studiously avoided any mention of the problematic concept “beginning” here.

According to the hypothesis Freud proposed, the elements that make up the Judaic religion were not unprecedented; rather, Moses took over a number of trends that had been popular at certain times in Egyptian culture—including circumcision, rejection of magical rituals, a turn away from the afterlife, and the belief in a single, invisible God.⁴ For part of this hypothesis, Freud could rely on factual historical knowledge about Egypt: such monotheistic, anti-representational religious principles had in fact been decreed by Akhenaton (ca. 1350-1330 BC) and imposed on Egyptian society during his reign. After his death, however, Egyptian culture reverted to the polytheistic, image-saturated, and magical religion that broadly characterized Ancient Egypt before, while any reminders of Akhenaton’s reign were thoroughly excised from history. In Freud’s hypothesis, the “historical Moses” was an Egyptian priest, who continued to adhere to the principles of Akhenaton’s culture. According to Freud, Moses was forced to flee Egypt with his followers, and developed these principles into a form of counter-religion which formed the basis for what is now known as the Jewish faith.

Bible researchers of the 1930s and 40s were less than amused by Freud’s conclusions. Martin Buber, the important Hebrew Bible translator, dismissed Freud’s work outright as “unscientific” and based on “groundless hypotheses.”⁵ Tellingly, Buber did not latch on to the later psychoanalytical maneuvers of Freud’s work on Moses, in which Freud interpreted the whole Jewish religion as the collective repression of an oedipal murder of the father.

(Freud, mindful of its contentiousness, had in fact originally refrained from publishing this part.) Instead, Buber went straight for Moses' Egyptian roots. For Buber knew as well as did Freud what was at stake with this radical interpretive maneuver: "Whoever wishes to make an Egyptian of [Moses]," Buber pronounced, "deprives the tale of the foundation on which it rests."⁶ The story of Moses was clearly a struggle about the power of beginnings.

The critical question, however, whose importance Buber refused to acknowledge here, was not about the authentic, historical Moses. It is unlikely, barring any sensational archaeological discoveries, that any advances can be made on the question of the historical figure of Moses. Freud, for his part, was highly aware that he was staking his scientific reputation in publishing his interpretive musings on the figure of Moses, which rested, in his own words, "on feet of clay," on flimsy historical evidence.⁷ That is to say, Freud was only too well aware of what it meant to approach the question of origins from the perspective of what subsequently "came of it,"⁸ but he still considered it a worthwhile pursuit. What mattered to Freud, then, was the very different question of how posterity chooses to remember Moses, and how it remembers the beginnings of monotheism.

The Egyptologist Jan Assmann has recently pointed to the political context of 1930s Austro-Germany in which this radical redefinition took place. The broader question Freud was asking in his late work on Moses was not why the Jews were being persecuted, but rather what element in the Jewish faith may have caused anti-Semitism. (It is noteworthy in this context that Freud does not speak of the "Hebrews" or the "Israelites," as a historical argument may well have done, but rather of the "Jews"—employing a term whose essentialism was at once more timeless and extremely timely in the 1930s.) The reason Freud proposed is concerned with the exclusivity that is peculiar to monotheistic religions. As Assmann points out, polytheistic religions are "translatable," as the godheads almost

invariably represent cosmic elements—the sun, the moon, the stars. Such representations can be worshipped with different names in different cultures without problems, since they are merely different signifiers to the same signified. It is monotheism, whose exclusivity is enhanced by the concomitant image-prohibition, that only makes possible the primordial distinction between the true religion and the idolatry of others.⁹

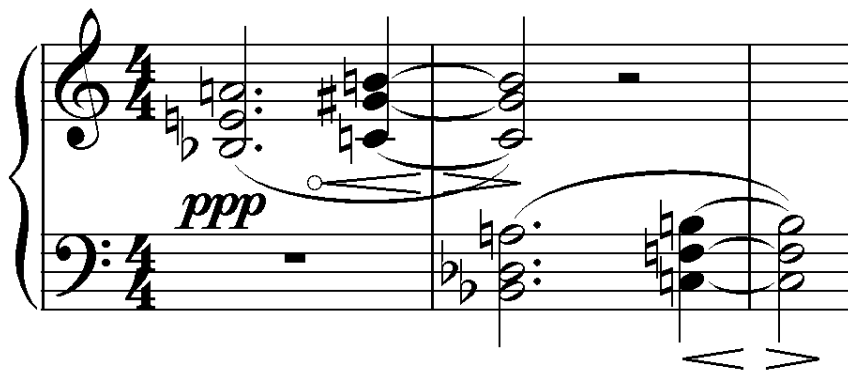
Assmann suggests that Freud's answer, relating the beginnings of monotheism backwards to Moses' Egyptian origins, was an act of diluting the notion of the uniqueness of the Chosen People.¹⁰ At the same time, this maneuver allowed Freud to rescue certain elements of the Jewish faith: for in making Moses an Egyptian it was not Judaism as such that was at fault, but rather the primordial distinction into monotheistic religion and false idolatry. The purity of Moses' origin, which Freud jettisoned at the outset of his book *Moses and Monotheism*, barely covered with a fig leaf of regret, was a sacrifice Freud willingly made in an effort—historically futile, as it turned out—to undo this fateful primordial distinction.

I

On the surface, Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron*, composed between 1930 and 1932, that is a few years before Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, appears to circumvent the whole vexed problem of Moses' origins. For ostensibly Schoenberg tackled the problem of the beginning by opening *in medias res*, by jumping in at a later stage of the story: Act I, Scene 1 opens with the scene of Moses' encounter with God in the Burning Bush. We know that Schoenberg was deeply engaged with this moment in Moses' story: not only is it the first scene in the opera plot, it was in fact also the first part that Schoenberg conceived; he mentioned Moses at the Burning Bush—then still described as a cantata in its own right—as early as 1926 in a letter to Webern.¹¹

If we look a little more closely, however, we find that the opera begins even a little earlier: scene 1 does not start, strictly speaking, until a few bars into the score.¹² The opera begins before the beginning, so to speak, with just a few chords while the curtain is still down. And it is this strange twilight zone—not quite an overture, not quite part of the first scene—that I want to explore here. As in Freud’s example, the problem of the beginning presents itself primarily as a problem of exegesis. It is important to underline here that I do not mean this lightly: nothing would be more mistaken than to think that interpretive problems are any less real, or less important, than any other kind of problems. And the strong reactions to Freud’s hypotheses already give us a glimpse of how much can be at stake in such a problem of exegesis. In fact, the problem of the beginning of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron* is a test case for our urge to charge the beginning with a heightened sense of meaning, which is part and parcel of interpretative and analytical practice, in music just as much as in other parts of cultural practice.

Ex. 1a



All we hear at the very opening of the opera, as Example 1a summarizes, are six solo instruments accompanying six solo voices. Karl Heinz Wörner, the author of the first large-scale analytical study of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*, whose observations set the tone for generations to come, has described the opening as follows:

The chords each have three voices and each is held for three crotchets. The first and last chord, consisting of an augmented and a perfect fourth, are the same; both middle chords, consisting of a minor third and an augmented fifth, are the same, save for a reversal of the intervals in each chord. The intervallic progression from one chord to the next is the same, A to B, the major second. Rhythmically and dynamically, too, the progressions are identical.¹³

For Wörner, this perfect symmetry in the first three bars of the score signifies “God as an idea—this concept was taken over by Moses from his ancestors, to whom God had revealed himself. Infinite God speaks at the beginning of the opera, [...] not in words, but in sound.”¹⁴

Much ink has been spilled about this opening since Wörner’s groundbreaking study of 1957.¹⁵ The central point, that the sounds are an emblematic representation of God’s qualities, as Moses announces only seconds later, has become a cornerstone of the interpretation of the work. We remember, Moses addresses God as “*einzigster, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger, unsichtbarer und unvorstellbarer Gott*” (“only one, infinite, omnipresent, unperceived and inconceivable God.”) The symmetrical perfection of this figure, complete with the wonderfully blended and unified sound, would indeed seem to bespeak these divine perfections.¹⁶

For the rest of the opera—and this is the second interpretive cornerstone of *Moses und Aron*—God is most closely associated with the twelve-tone series that forms the exclusive basis of the musical material of the opera. The Schoenberg scholar Pamela Cooper-White summed this up most concisely: “Schoenberg intended the purest use of his own system, the twelve-tone system, to represent God, [...] Schoenberg most likely viewed the row itself as a

compositional rule parallel to the Law (Torah) or the Commandments.”¹⁷ Other scholars have tried to formalize this association in a systematic manner. The late David Lewin, for one, formed analogies between the following two complexes. He argued that the entities or characters—God-row, Moses-composer (Schoenberg), Aron-performer, the People-audience—fulfill equivalent places within their respective systems, the operatic and the social.¹⁸

There is no reason to doubt either of these two interpretive traditions. In fact, both are easy to substantiate in the continuation of the opera. There is only one problem: they do not go together. Let us go back to Wörner’s interpretation and press him a little harder: his description of the musical emblem with which the opera begins seems strangely tortuous, in the way he explains the intervals one by one and lists their symmetrical relations. This is especially strange considering that the analysis of twelve-tone music has a very precise terminology that Wörner, and many German analysts following him, eschew in this particular instance.

The reason they have to resort to this fairly cumbersome description is simple: the beginning emblem does not follow Schoenberg’s rules of twelve-tone music. We can examine this a little more closely. Example 1b shows the opening again, this time with the full twelve-tone row (P_0) and its inversion (I_0) in the systems underneath. If we read the rows back to front, we can also identify the retrograde (R_0) and the retrograde inversion (RI_0).¹⁹ Once we consider the beginning emblem in the context of the row formation, we observe that it in fact consists of the first three notes of the row and then skips right ahead to the last three, omitting the middle six tones. The following lower chords, by contrast, are taken from the retrograde inversion of the row. That is to say, if we take our prime form of the row, in the middle system of the example, as a starting point, the intervals in the lower system are

mirrored upside down along a central pitch axis, and the order of notes is reversed so that the row is played from end to beginning. In other words, what the lower three voices sing are the last three notes of the inverted row followed by the first three notes, again leaving out the middle six notes.

Ex. 1b

The image displays musical notation for Example 1b. At the top, a piano introduction in 4/4 time features two staves. The right staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It contains two measures of chords, each marked with a box and labeled P_0 1,2,3. The left staff begins with a bass clef and contains two measures of chords, each marked with a box and labeled RI_0 1,2,3. A *ppp* (pianissimo) marking is placed between the staves. Arrows connect the boxed chords in the piano introduction to corresponding boxed sections in three vocal staves below. The first vocal staff is labeled P_0 and shows a sequence of notes with an arrow pointing right. The second vocal staff is labeled I_0 and shows a sequence of notes with an arrow pointing right. The third vocal staff is labeled RI_0 and shows a sequence of notes with an arrow pointing right. The notation illustrates the relationship between the piano's emblematic chords and the vocal parts' presentation of the row.

It is only after we hear the emblematic chords at the beginning that the first row is completed: what happens is that the chordal progression is repeated in the following measures, and this time the piano plays the six middle notes that were missing at the beginning. Example 2 shows this schematically just for the first pair of chords, but the same is true for the second pair. These “filled-out” repetitions of the chords actually highlight the problems surrounding the opening emblem. We may well admire the beautiful symmetries in Schoenberg’s design of the opening, in the way Wörner does, but it seems that in praising

The basic rule that the succession of tones must always follow their order in the set evidently does not apply to the opening of *Moses und Aron*. When we count up the chords we do hear twelve notes, it is true, but not the twelve notes of the row. We notice that no fewer than four notes are doubled. As Wörner observed initially, the four chords are based on the repeated melodic interval A-B, and we could add to this the parallel bass interval Bb-C.

Schoenberg does not start the opera with a complete statement of the twelve-note row, and it seems this is an emphatic gesture. We therefore have a hermeneutic problem: if the beginning emblem really represents God's perfection, eternity and indescribability then it does so *only* while being in breach of the fundamental principles of the compositional technique closely associated with the divine qualities. If the row signifies divine perfection it is hard to imagine that we would begin with a breach of the musical law. Schoenberg's musical representation of God, right at the beginning of the opera, pulls the interpretive rug out from underneath its own feet.

This issue takes us right back to the problem of beginnings, and few beginnings are more complicated than that of the story surrounding Moses and Aaron. Freud, as we saw, took the question down the narrative path, but this is not the only way to approach the problematic beginning. The bible scholar Ephraim Urbach tackles the question from the angle of structural efficacy. One crucial problem in the story of Exodus, he points out, raises the awkward question: "Why does the bible not *begin* with the Ten Commandments?"²¹ The Ten Commandments clearly form the most important part, indeed the foundation, of the Hebrew Bible. In many ways, it is tempting to ask analogously, "why doesn't *Moses und Aron* begin with the Twelve-Note Row?"

The problem here lies in the analysts' eagerness to establish too close a connection between the musical features of the opening and the divine qualities that Moses lists immediately afterwards. Of course, it is only too tempting to associate words with musical features that immediately precede or succeed them—this is in fact one of the chief assumptions of the analysis of vocal music. Just for the purpose of the exercise, let's take this hermeneutic strain one step further: we noticed earlier that the referential pitches in the opening emblem are B \flat -A-C-B, or in its German pitch designation that Schoenberg would have used, B-A-C-H. But should we therefore assume that Schoenberg's God is Bach?²² Even though we know Schoenberg revered Bach, there are good reasons to be hesitant to think that a firm association between the Old Testament God and the protestant *Thomaskantor* from Leipzig would be hermeneutically enlightening in this particular context.

After all, it is precisely representation that is being problematized in the opera. We would do well, therefore, to treat tried-and-tested hermeneutic strategies with a large pinch of salt in this context. I do believe that there is a link between the beginning emblem and Schoenberg's conception of God through music, but I do not think a trivial one-on-one mapping of musical features onto levels of meaning will lead us to a particularly sophisticated understanding of the opera. Let us hold off the temptation to assign meaning to specific musical events and take a step back to look at the larger picture.

What I would like to propose instead is a fairly close analogy to the problem of "why does the Bible not begin with the Ten Commandments?" For a simple example, think about those passages of biblical history that precede Moses' emergence from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law. As the bible scholar Nahum Sarna points out, we should not assume that people went around murdering, stealing, and bearing false witness with impunity all the time prior to the Ten Commandments. He writes:

It is taken for granted that the Ten Commandments comprise the minimal moral imperatives essential to the maintenance of an ordered and wholesome society; but here again, is there anything uncommon about their contents? What was the state of the world prior to the revelation at Sinai? Was it steeped in savagery and barbarism? The bible itself assumes the existence of a moral code of universal application from the beginning of the appearance of civilized life on this planet. Otherwise, how could Cain's slaughter of his brother have been a culpable offence? For what 'lawlessness' could God have brought the great Flood, and for what 'evil' would the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah and their allied cities have been brought to account?²³

One might question whether the two rather more abstract Commandments that are central to *Moses und Aron*—the First and the Second, that is, monotheism and image prohibition—would also be covered quite so neatly by Sarna's argument, but it seems fair to conclude nonetheless that *somehow* the fundamental laws that consolidated the Ten Commandments were already around even before their manifestation on the tablets. This idea of an emergence in time, and we might say more broadly, this multipolar, non-linear conception of time, is what the literary scholar Erich Auerbach, in the celebrated opening chapter of his influential study, *Mimesis*, identified as a specifically biblical form of time.²⁴

Such a principle can be seen at work in the twelve-tone technique in Schoenberg's opera. The row is always already there—the musical emblem would make no sense if we did not recognize it as a fragment of the row, but the row has not manifested itself before the opera proper begins. In the ill-defined space that demarcates the few measures after the beginning

SYMPHONY No.9

I

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)
Op. 125

Allegro, ma non troppo, un poco maestoso (♩=88)

2 Flauti

2 Oboi 1

2 Clarinetti in B

2 Fagotti

1. II in D
4 Corni

III. IV in B basso

2 Trombe in D

Timpani in D-A

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabasso

10

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Fg.

(D)

Cor.

(B)

Tr.

(D)

Timp.

VI.

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

of the opera, but before the beginning of the first scene, the basic building material only gradually emerges as a fully fledged row.

II

Music is surprisingly good at expressing this form of gradual emergence in time, and it has a long tradition of putting this procedure into practice. Witness that most famous piece of Western music, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony: its beginning, reproduced here in Example 3, is the paragon of a musical *creatio ex nihilo*—as if out of nothing, with glimmering string tremolos out of which motivic fragments emerge and finally come together in the first theme. The musicologist Leo Treitler even goes one step further. He has made the evocative suggestion that the real beginning of the piece is not the first note that we hear, but rather the silence that precedes the initial tremolo.²⁵

Ex. 3

Such techniques of emergence on the musical stage were brought to perfection by none other than Richard Wagner, which in the operatic context of *Moses und Aron* is particularly pertinent. Take the famous infinite Eb-major sound with which *Rheingold* opens: the gradual build-up of the Eb-major sonority over something like seven minutes is a much-discussed example of such an emergence.²⁶ Its significance, however, is only partially captured if we ignore what happens immediately afterwards. Example 4 shows that when the harmony eventually shifts to Ab major this is not the end of the sonic creation of the world, but we actually move on to the next step in this evolutionary history of music: instrumental music turns into vocal music as the Rhinemaidens start singing. And even there, as Jean-Jacques Nattiez has pointed out, we can observe a form of emergence: the Rhinemaidens begin with a surge of what are largely nonsense syllables: “*Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle, walle zur Wiege! Wagalaweia! Wallala, weiala weia!*”²⁷ Out of these watery sounds, initially intoned as a

Fl.
Fl.
Engl.Hr.
Clar.
B.Ci.
Fag.
Tromp.
Tr.
Hr.
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
Pos. 2. CB.
CB.
Viol.
Br.
Vc.
C.B.

WOGLINDE (kreist im anmuthig schwimmender Bewegung um das mittlere Riff.)

Hr. 1^o

Viol.

Br.

WOGL.

Wei . a! Wa . ga! Wo . ge, du Wel . le, wal . le zur Wie . ge! wa . ga . la wei . a! wal . la . la wei . ala wei .

WELLG.

FLOSSH.

Vc.

CB.

1. u. 2.

Fl.

Fag. 1^o

Hör. 1. u. 2.

Viol.

Br.

WOGL.

a!

WELLG. (WELLGUNDE'S Stimme von oben.) Mit Wellgundewarich zu zwei!

FLOSSH. Wog - lin - de. wachst du allein. WELLG. (sie taucht aus der Fluth zum Riff herab.) Lass sehn, wie du

Vc.

CB.

pentatonic melody, a fully formed language with grammar and vocabulary evolves only gradually.

Ex. 4

As a further example, Wagner's final music drama *Parsifal* employs a comparable strategy of progressing from noise to speaking to singing. At the beginning of Act II, the magician Klingsor summons up Kundry, the enigmatic female in a male world. As she awakes from her trance-like sleep, she responds with a terrible scream, followed by "a loud wail that subsides to a frightened whimper."²⁸ Wagner, who was very specific about the sounds he wanted to hear, gave Kundry a number of sighs for the first articulated noises, "*Ach! Ach!*" Only gradually do words form: "*Tiefe Nacht! Wahnsinn... Oh! Wut... Ach! Jammer! Schlaf... Schlaf... Tiefer Schlaf! Tod!*" ("Oh!—Oh! Darkest night! Madness! O rage! O misery! Sleep ... sleep ... Deep sleep! Death!")²⁹ Her first fully formed sentence is the alliterative "*Da, da dient' ich.*" ("There—there I served.") After this slow awakening, as we remember, Kundry, swiftly regains full musical and linguistic competence and becomes extremely eloquent for the rest of Act II. This example, whose expansiveness makes it awkward to reproduce the music here, shows a much more complex interaction of the emergence of both language and (sung) music out of silence and noise, in a manner that subsumes the earlier two examples.

And where, we might ask rhetorically, would Schoenberg be without Wagner?³⁰ With this very brief history of musical emergence in mind, we can return to *Moses und Aron*: because this idea not only touches on the question of the row but is intimately linked with the complicated question of spoken words and singing.

III

To start with, the chordal emblem we examined earlier—the beginning music that is “not-yet the row,”—is presented by wordless singing; we hear the sound of the vocal ensemble, but it

cannot be fairly described as vocal music in any meaningful sense. The six solo voices form an integral part of the overall soundscape; it is not by accident that Schoenberg wanted for them to be placed in the orchestra pit. In fact, for much of the first scene the six solo voices sing a text that is doubled in the *Sprechstimme* of the chorus. While chorus and solo voices intone the same text passages at the same time, each group moves in different rhythms that unfold independently from one another. The effect of this is quite extraordinary, as anyone who knows the opera will remember—it could be called a kind of heterophony that juxtaposes singing and speaking.³¹

The first scene is fully based on the row, though in a form that is largely determined by the formation of motives, such as the chords that we heard at the opening. Melodic presentations of the whole row do not occur here. Moses's *Sprechstimme*, meanwhile, is notated in precise but unordered intervals, which have only a very tentative affinity to the procedures based on the row.³² Instead, Moses's part moves in independently developed intervallic motives and spoken melodies. While in Act I, Scene 1, the solo voices and the orchestra take a very intricate motivic approach to the twelve-tone material that handles the order of tones with a certain degree of liberty, it is noteworthy that after the beginning of Scene 1 proper the row statements are usually complete.

This can be illustrated with a short example. Example 5 shows a passage with the six solo voices and the *Sprechstimme* chorus, intoning the same text in their kind of heterophony. The solo voices are bound by the material of the row: the first measure is a full statement in which the row is distributed among all three parts. Even though the soprano part may seem more melodic, it is nonetheless fully integrated with the other voices. The solo voices are always treated as an entity here: no one part ever presents the full row, and conversely, the row always furnishes both melodic and harmonic elements. In fact, the second measure is

nothing but a retrograde of the same material; it is sung in reverse. The F#, the peak note in the middle, is claimed by both sides of this musical palindrome. The *Sprechstimme* chorus, meanwhile, does not engage in this reversal of the material: their rhythms march on relentlessly.

Ex. 5

The musical score for Example 5 is divided into two main sections. The first section, labeled "All 12 notes of the row", shows the vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor) singing a melody based on a 12-note row. The second section, labeled "Retrograde of the same row", shows the vocal parts singing the same melody in reverse. The Sprechstimme part continues with its own rhythms, labeled "Sprechstimme rhythms continue".

All 12 notes of the row

Retrograde of the same row

S
so vernimmst du mei-ne Stim-me aus je-dem Ding...

A
so ver - nimmst du mei-ne Stim - me

T
so ver - nimmst du mei-ne Stim - me

Sprechstimme
mei-ne Stim - me aus je-dem Ding.

Sprechstimme rhythms continue

It is not until the second scene of Act I that we hear the first sung melodic statement of the row, reproduced in Example 6. Appropriately enough, it is Aron—the great communicator, the man of the people—who presents it to us in his opening words to Moses: “*Du Sohn meiner Väter, schickt dich mir der große Gott?*” (“O son of my fathers, are you sent by mighty God?”) Moses, meanwhile continues his *Sprechstimme* in unrelated intervals, responding: “*Du Sohn meines Vaters, Bruder des Geistes, aus dem der Einzige sprechen will, vernimm mich und ihn, und sage, was du verstehst.*” (“O son of my father, brother in spirit, through whom the only one is to speak, now hear me and him, and tell me what you perceive.”) Incidentally, the subtle difference in the way the two brothers address each other is highly significant:

Moses is the “son of [Aron’s] forefathers”—in the plural. Moses’ spiritual ancestorship goes back to the first generations, to whom God spoke directly. Aron, by contrast, is the “son of [Moses’s] father” in the singular—he cannot make the same spiritual claims as his brother, but he is much more firmly grounded in the familial and social ties of his world. Ex. 6

The musical score for Example 6 is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 123-126) features a vocal line (Aron) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter." The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* and *mf*. The second system (measures 127-130) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics: "Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter, Du Sohn mei-ner fa-ter." The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* and *fp*. The score is divided into measures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 (etc.).

The organization of voice and music here is very different than in the first scene. As we see here, Aron’s vocal part is written out as independent melodic entities that are not replicated in the orchestra. The role of the orchestra is at once more accompanimental and more independent: it forms its own textures and motives that bear no direct links to Aron’s part.

Finally, after Aron continually fails to grasp the magnitude of God’s mission for Moses and himself, an exasperated Moses starts singing himself. He sings, in Example 7, a full statement of the row, to the important words: “*Reinige dein Denken, lös es von Wertlosem, weihe es Wahren: kein andrer Gewinn dankt deinem Opfer.*” (“Purify your thinking. Free it from the worthless. Dedicate it to the true. No other reward is given your offerings”) This is the only time Moses overcomes his speech impediment and breaks out of the shackles of his *Sprechstimme*. We will not hear him sing again for the rest of the opera. From there on the roles are clearly distributed: God will speak to Moses, but Aron will be his mouthpiece. Ex. 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

208 *Langsamer* (♩=72) (*diese Stelle kann eventuell gesungen werden*) (it is possible for this passage to be sung)

Slower

Rei - ni - ge dein Den - ken, lös es von Wert - lo - sem, wei - he es
 Pu - ri - fy your think - ing. Free it from worth - less things. Let it be

213 (*nicht mehr gesungen*) (no longer sung) rit. -

Wah - - rem: kein and - rer Ge - winn dankt dei - nem Op - fer.
 right - - eous. No oth - er re - ward is giv'n your off'ings.

At this point, we should perhaps add one further musical example demonstrating the range of possibilities of gradual emergence in music: Haydn's late oratorio *The Creation*, whose famous introduction, "The Representation of Chaos," ("Die Vorstellung des Chaos") begins with nothing but a dully assertive C in octaves that still leaves open all possibilities. Over the next measures the music begins to explore them tentatively: first by adding an unexpected Eb, suggesting a C minor harmony, but immediately thwarting this notion by adding an equally surprising Ab. It is not until the end of Raphael's following recitative that the emergent beginning can be said to have reached a breakthrough. But what a breakthrough it is: to the words "Let there be light"—the epitome of the sublime, ever since Longinus' *Peri hypsous*—the full chorus answers with a blindingly radiant C-major fortissimo: "And there was light." It is only then, some ten minutes into the oratorio, that the potential that was implicit right from the outset is realized in the music.

Ex. 8

This heightened moment of Haydn's *Creation* only derives its meaning in connection with the music leading up to it. Just as it would be wrong to isolate this latter moment in Haydn's *Creation*, so it would be misguided in *Moses und Aron* to conclude that the more obvious melodic, sung approach to the twelve-tone material was somehow superior to the more involved motivic and chordal approach Schoenberg favors in the first scene. In fact, in many ways the highly sophisticated use of the material in Scene 1 is just as typical of Schoenberg's twelve-tone style on the whole.³³ In this context, however, where the problems of representation and communication are central, the eventual appearance of the row on the musical surface—as a sensual presentation and as reification at the same time—would seem to mark a significant moment in the opera. It marks a breakthrough to the sung surface, a breakthrough in a very literal sense, which can help us come to terms with the complexities of the beginning of the story of *Moses und Aron*.

IV

The literary scholar Roland Barthes has pointed out that there can be moments that have significance but no meaning.³⁴ His observation is a useful distinction in our search for an interpretation of the opening moments of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*. A direct mapping of music onto the nearest available text may be a natural instinct, a common strategy in the analysis of vocal music, but it does not necessarily lead us in the right direction.³⁵

Schoenberg's own penchant for number games and anagrams does not make this task any easier. In their contributions to this volume both Eitan Agmon and Eric Zakim point toward the paradox of *Moses und Aron* that the title of this towering intellectual and artistic modernist *chef d'oeuvre* was ultimately determined by a trivial superstition, Schoenberg's persistent trikaidekaphobia. Likewise, Schoenberg's love for anagrams (he called his son

Ronald, in clear reference to his own first name), and for translating the letters of names into musical notes is well documented. In this sense, it is useful to revise what we earlier said about the pitches B-A-C-H that frame the initial emblem. It is almost beyond doubt that Schoenberg would have been aware of the significance of these notes, and that he would have deliberately arranged the notes in this way in reference to Bach's name. Yet they do not, in Barthes' terms, carry any meaning. In other words, we are not forced to turn this observation into a meaningful feature of our interpretation.

Carl Dahlhaus has drawn attention to the problem of meaning in the context of what he called Schoenberg's "aesthetic theology," whose foundation he saw in Jewish mysticist traditions. Dahlhaus's conceit links directly back to Sarna's earlier enquiry into the position of Ten Commandments within the Hebrew Bible: for Dahlhaus, the vantage point of understanding Schoenberg should not proceed from a "hard and fast meaning"—which would issue forth from the very beginning—but the assumption of "a possibility of meaning which can be updated in various directions."³⁶ This seems nowhere more pertinent than at the outset of *Moses und Aron*, a beginning before the beginning.

And let's remember that, while there is a clear technical aspect to the problem of the beginning of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, it is a problem of exegesis—no less so than the interpretive specter Freud raised in his *Moses und Monotheism*. It seems that Edward Said is grappling with something very similar when he argues, "the beginning is the first step in the intentional production of meaning."³⁷ It is important here to appreciate the fine-tuned definition, where the beginning is nothing but the "first step." We can thus read Said here as a caveat not to rush out to find *all* meaning in the beginning. Sometimes this will lead us to interpretive short-circuits. We are well advised to remember that sometimes meaning needs a little time to get going. (Said leaves the question unanswered—perhaps wisely so—whether

the “end” would constitute, by analogy, the last step in the intentional production of meaning.) In the case of Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aron*, the opening emblem is a model of contrapuntal and sonic significance, unparalleled in its density for the rest of the opera. Yet its meaning only unfolds over the course of the first three scenes, when the full range of Schoenberg’s twelve-tone language that he adopts in the opera is fully explored.

It is critical to remember that the opening emblem is set off from the dramatic beginning of the opera. That musical meaning and verbal signification do not map neatly onto one another is perhaps the most concise expression of the problematic of representation, which is, after all, the central problem of the opera, right from its opening bars. In this sense, it is appropriate, perhaps painfully so, as it runs counter to our instincts to seek meaning wherever we can find it, not to delve into a conclusion that would triumphantly sweep aside all previous attempts at interpretation and instead tie up the strands of our analysis into a new exegesis of row-structure-mapped-onto-plot. Any such renewed conclusiveness would do violence to the spirit of the work and its problematic of representation. This is not to abandon our responsibility as interpreters: we have undeniably covered considerable ground here. The real realization, meanwhile, is the ironic acceptance that all we have done—all we can do—it to expand the purview of the beginning.

The beginning of *Moses und Aron* is not simply found in the emblem to which most analytical efforts have been directed, but rather in that which follows. In a similar vein, Freud’s exegete, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, has drawn attention to the fact that in Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* it is “not only the ‘origin’ of a religion that should engage us, but ‘what has come out of it’”³⁸ The interpretation of the beginning of *Moses und Aron* as a gradual process toward a breakthrough, is such a first step in the creation of a specifically musical

meaning that aims not to seek refuge in the ensuing text, plot or image, that in other words eschews the elements of representation.

Here, too, Moses' sigh "Meine Zunge ist schwer," seems to apply to the musical processes that we have drawn on in our exploration of the beginning. This mode of analytical endeavor tries to stay aloof of ready-to-hand Aron-esque signification, but it comes at the price of a certain clunkiness, where somewhat inelegant analogies to other musical processes of gradual comings-into-being are the best interpretive pointers we can provide. But, of course, just as Moses realizes in one of his most purist moments that he cannot fully escape the constraints of representation, so these reflections bring with it—inevitably—the risk of embedding Schoenberg's work in a historical trajectory that relates it back to Wagner and Viennese Classicism. As a composer, Schoenberg may have personally approved of this, but it also implies that the pure abstraction that Moses' monotheism was searching for remains elusive. After all, we remain captivated by the inescapable beginning.

The conclusion, however, that we are, after all this, still only at the beginning is not a bad one. For it is precisely by continuing to be beholden to the beginning, by tarrying over this first step in the production of intentional meaning, that we can get closer—significantly so—to the heart of the problem of meaning in Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*.

CAPTIONS

Ex. 1a: The opening emblem of *Moses und Aron*

Ex. 1b: The row qualities of the opening emblem

Ex. 2: Full twelve-tone chromaticism in the opening

Ex. 3: *Creatio ex nihilo* in Beethoven, Symphony no. 9

Ex. 4: The Rhinemaidens start singing in Wagner's *Rhinegold*

Ex. 5: Row treatment in Act I, Scene 1

Ex. 6: Row treatment in Act I, Scene 2

Ex. 7: Moses sings

Ex. 8: The beginning of the “Representation of Chaos” from Haydn’s *Creation* and the blazing C major of the chorus singing “And it was light.”

NOTES

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1967), p.

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² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 1.

³ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 22.

⁴ To be sure, these traits clash with our common image of Egyptian culture, with its many gods in various animal shapes and pronounced belief in the afterlife. Freud argues, in *Moses and Monotheism*, pp. 28-35, that this polytheistic tradition had been briefly abandoned under Akhnaton, and that the historical Moses continued to adhere to this monotheistic anti-representational trend after Akhnaton’s death, while the rest of Egyptian culture returned to its accustomed ways. While the veracity of Freud’s claims has been contested, this is not the place to rehearse an involved argument that would lead us away from our main focus.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1958), p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

⁷ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 17.

⁸ See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 87. See also fn. 38 below.

⁹ This is true for both Judaism and Christianity. Freud makes explicit the relevance of his work to the current situation vis-à-vis the National Socialists in *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 117. See also Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 4 and 167.

¹⁰ See Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, pp. 143 and 158.

¹¹ Pamela Cooper-White, *Schoenberg and the God-Idea: The opera Moses und Aron* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1985), p. 8.

¹² The precise beginning of Scene 1 is ambiguous. The *Reinschriftparticell*, Arnold Schönberg Center, Wien (Nachlaß Schönberg, MS 63, Archivnummern 2771-2966), shows the beginning in the middle of m. 7, and various editors have interpreted this in different ways.

¹³ Karl Heinz Wörner: *Schoenberg's 'Moses and Aaron'*, tr. Paul Hamburger (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 55. Translation modified. Hamburger's translation deviates significantly from the original; a substantial change from the original is reintroduced in this quotation; cf. *Magie und Gotteswort: Schönbergs Moses und Aron* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1957), p. 45.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 45/55.

¹⁵ See for instance, Hannes Odil Steck, *Moses und Aron: Die Oper Arnold Schönbergs und ihr biblischer Stoff* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1981); Christian Martin Schmidt, *Schönbergs Oper Moses und Aron: Analyse der diastematischen, formalen und musikedramatischen Komposition* (Mainz, 1988); Stefan Strecker, *Der Gott Arnold Schönbergs: Blicke durch die Oper Moses und Aron* (Münster: Lit, 1999); and Marc M. Kerling, 'O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt': *Die Gottesfrage in in Arnold Schönbergs Oper "Moses und Aron"* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 2004).

¹⁶ The special sonic qualities of this opening sonority are also an important point in Elliott Gyger's contribution in this issue.

¹⁷ White, *Schoenberg and the God-Idea*, p. 87.

¹⁸ David Lewin, "Moses und Aron: Some General Remarks and Analytic Notes for Act I, Scene I," *Perspectives of New Music* 6 (1967), reprinted in *Studies in Music with Text* (New York: Oxford, 2006), pp. 367.

¹⁹ See also Lewin, "Moses und Aron," pp. 370-371.

²⁰ Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber, 1975), p. 226. See also Michael Cherlin, "The Formal and Dramatic Organization of Schoenberg's Moses und Aron," PhD Dissertation (Yale University, 1983), p. 27.

²¹ See Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages, Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

²² Alexander Ringer draws attention to the B-A-C-H motive and pushes this line of interpretation as far as seems tenable. See his *Arnold Schoenberg: Das Leben im Werk*, (Kassel/Stuttgart: Bärenreiter/Metzler, 2002) p. 257.

²³ Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Socken Books, 1996), p. 138.

²⁴ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), see especially ch. 1.

²⁵ Leo Treitler, *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 19-20. More recently, Daniel Barenboim has seized this idea in his 2006 BBC Reith lectures and 2006 Harvard's Norton Lectures.

²⁶ Among the many interpretations of this scene, Arthur Seidl's central discussion in his *Vom Musikalisch-Erhabenen: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (2nd edn, Leipzig: Kahnt Nachfolger, 1907) is noteworthy.

²⁷ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: An Essay in Interpretation*, tr. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 53-60.

²⁸ Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act II, rehearsal fig. 137.

²⁹ A trenchant analysis of the inarticulate in literary "Ach!" sounds is found in the introduction of Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, tr. Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

³⁰ While there can be no doubt about Schoenberg's indebtedness to Wagner, the question of to what extent *Moses und Aron* should count as a post-Wagnerian music drama is subject to some debate. On the one hand, Ringer, *Das Leben im Werk*, p. 265, makes a case for Schoenberg as an antipode to Wagner. On the other, White, *Schoenberg and the God-Idea*, ch. 5, argues for leitmotifs in *Moses und Aron*.

³¹ For more on the uses of *Sprechstimme*, see Elliott Gyger's contribution to this issue.

³² See Ulrich Krämer, "Zur Notation der Sprechstimme bei Schoenberg" in *Musikkonzepte* 112/113, p. 28.

³³ See particularly Ethan Haimo's essay in this volume.

³⁴ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, tr. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Noonday Press, 1968), p. 1.

³⁵ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker also warn that in the analysis of opera, text and music, those most basic parameters, cannot be assumed to be in a straightforward relationship. See their *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

³⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, *Schoenberg and The New Music*, tr. Derek Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 92.

³⁷ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 5.

³⁸ Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses*, p. 87.